



DEFINITION AND FEATURES OF FOLK LITERATURE

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Folk literature is one of the major branch of folklore as mentioned above. Oral literature is another term used to denote the same. Although, the term 'literature' is often considered paradoxical to be attached with 'folk' as the word 'literature' means 'written works such as poems, plays and novels'. While the folk literature is transmitted orally and that's why the prefix 'oral' is attached with it. "Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu introduced the term *orature* in an attempt to avoid an oxymoron, but *oral literature* remains more common both in academic and popular writing". (Auger 210) The term, anyhow, didn't get popular and 'folk literature' and 'oral literature' are unanimously used in folkloristic.

Attributives like 'oral', 'traditional', 'unwritten', 'spoken', 'verbal', 'primitive', 'fossil', 'floating' and 'uncultured' are given to literature of this kind. Dr Kanu Jani gives a definition that comprises almost all the characteristics of folk literature.

Folk literature is the verbal expression which expresses folk culture in folk language, without any authorship, traditionally conveyed through generations, alienated from authorial influence, spreading natural innocence of folk society, fabricated by easily handy words and brevity, free of and preaching, exposing the real self of the society, transparent, easy, emotional, embedded with associative feelings, mostly unornamented—even if it is, the embellishments are such that can only take place in folk-imagination, giving freedom to the number of people to understand it—thus having ample textual editions, having complete absence of all officialism, all influence exercised from above, absence of subtle thoughts or self-introspection, extravagantly expressive, and originally not written, but transmitted orally". (31)

Based upon this definition, which itself borrows phrases from other definitions of folklore, important characteristics of folk literature or *Lokasāhitya* can be enlisted as below:

Language:

Folk literature is created in folk language, the language spoken by people. It contains colloquial and slang words along with the lingua franca of any particular region. The creator/s of folk literature are not concerned about the textual aspect unlike classical literature. The emotions of 'folk' is best expressed in their conversational language, carrying a cadence of their own. Their association with nature, in both the senses, is sound and they do not struggle to find a proper expression/wording for their spontaneous response to the situation; rather they put their emotions and responses in a very simple manner.

Simplicity of Expression:

Not only their language, but their way of putting the responses is very simple. They least try to create miraculous expression; even if they do, it is for the sake of accordance with the subject and never an attempt to show scholastic cleverness. They use embellishment and ornamentation, but those too are such which is accessible and understandable for their group. Their imaginations are as simple as their language. Folk-creators have never try to produce a 'work of literature'. Even when they describe a celestial character or event, they do not try to 'produce' magnificence but that splendour flows in a very simple manner.

Traditionalism:

Folk literature, in earlier times, was transmitted orally from generation to generation. This feature is considered to be the most significant one. The oral performances of tales, songs and other formats of folk literature are listened by numerous people and they try to recollect the same, reproduce it in more or less a similar fashion. Music, in case of folksongs, and intonations, in case of folktales, are also imitated similarly.

Versions:

Most the works of folk literature have various texts and versions. This happens due to the imitative learning process stated above, through which it is transmitted. Human being can't resist to add, subtract or transform the text to match his/her own psyche. Even the memorizing power plays its own role. The occasions when this folk literature was cherished by people were so

intense that break in the flow of the performance would kill all the romance. Therefore, the performers, when unable to recollect, produced some refrains or phrases of their own and maintained the flow anyhow.

Distinctiveness is not required:

The creator/s and carriers of folk literature are not concerned about their individual place in folk literature. Creation of folk literature is a self-motivated process where there is complete selflessness. The creator/s are apprehensive about the expression only. Repetitiveness of motifs, cadence and poetic devices are result of such inclination.

Pertaining with the Occasion:

Most of the works of folk literature create a desired effect on specific occasions only. Even a highly sombre elegiac song cannot produce impact on a social gathering; it can only befit in occasion of death. Similarly, a marriage song cannot replace lullaby. All these works of folk literature are created to be performed for its respective occasion. Works of classical literature stand on their own and do not require any such occasion to be read or performed but folk literature is only suitable for its relevant event.

Mirror of the society:

Ancient works of folk literature denotatively and connotatively contain the images of contemporary folk-psyche. It might lack historical accuracies, especially in the case of folktales, but it successfully reverberates the life of people. Other forms like sayings, proverbs, folksongs, etc. are helpful to understand almost all the anthropological aspects of a particular race or region.

Anonymousness:

The persons who created these immortal works are anonymous. In most the cases a refrain or a simple anecdote was sung or narrated first by a person; but they never cared to attach their name for any credit. Their existence on the earth was exhaustible but their contribution was not. Human knowledge system does not know whose expression turned into a proverb or a tale or a song. History does not tell us which poet first created the ballad of Robin Hood, neither has it told us who sung *Ballad of Tejmal*, a famous one in Saurashtra. Collectors have enriched human culture with numerous versions of these texts and many others but their period can rarely be estimated and total darkness prevails regarding their author/s. It would be wrong to say that a group or mass created these works of literature. Of course, there is someone who initiated and the mass gathered around quickly adopted it as the expression suited their emotions. Most of the folklorists agree on this. The creator or initiator of the text had understood the distinction of the moment as well as psyche of the people. That creator sung out such feelings which was felt by everyone. It was this mass only which made apt modulations in its text.

Auricular Method of Reception:

Folk literature is created orally but its reception and transmission requires utmost auricular concentration. One can come to know about the anthropological aspects from the texts of folk literature but the aesthetic beauty of the folk literature can be attained only through aural reception. It is possible to analyse the domestic life of Saurashtra by reading '*Radhiyali Raat*'—a collection of folksongs by Jhaverchand Meghani—but it is impossible, without aural reception, to realize the musical excellence of those people, who not only created the words but composed them instantaneously. Similarly, text of a lullaby would mean almost senseless to a reader but when sung, it means manifestation of motherhood to the listener.

Orality:

It is believed, almost unanimously, that folk literature is generated orally and it is transmitted orally as well. The belief is so strong that folk literature and oral literature are considered the same. Almost all the folklorists use the attributive 'oral' or '*kanthasth*' while discussing characteristics of folk literature. Dan Ben Amos says:

The medium of transmission that has been the most persistent in folklore definition. Almost from the beginning, the most accepted characteristic of folklore—whether conceived of as knowledge, thought, or art—has been its transmission by oral means. In order for an item to qualify as folklore, the prime requisite is that it have been in oral circulation and passed from one person to the other without the aid of any written texts. When a visual, musical or kinetic form is considered, the transmission can be through imitation". (*Toward 3*)

The term 'oral' or its synonyms like 'verbal', 'unwritten', 'spoken', 'not written' appear explicitly in thirteen and implicitly in one definition given in Maria Leech's *Standard Dictionary of folklore*.

Although folk literature was always transmitted orally, many attempts were made to preserve some traditional works falling into the category of folk literature i.e. *Kathāsaritsāgar*, *Alha-Udan*, *Beowulf*, Robin Hood tales, etc.

Acknowledging the advancement in technology, many works of the oral tradition could be inked and thus made available for the future generations. There is a certain class of people, including folklorists, who has studied, understood and interpreted folk literature from written sources as well, especially after the printing and publishing services became extensive. Orality at the dawn of folk literature was effortlessly accepted by the transmitters. The motive behind the creation of folk literature also justifies the initial orality. Folk literature was not created for any cerebral purpose; rather they were unpretentious and mostly spontaneous expression of human emotions. Therefore, creator/s of folk literature were not at all concerned about inscription or cognizant preservation of their art.

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